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A MAIDEN LADY'S OVERSEER.

Miss Priscilla Goodwin was a maiden lady of some fifty odd years, brisk, opinionated, and rather peculiar in her manners, and the proprietress of one of the finest plantations in Virginia, which she managed, with the help of an overseer, without asking advice or assistance of any one—an independent procedure no wise pleasing to her brother, Mr. Godfrey Goodwin, who lived at a short distance, and who, by virtue of his relation, thought himself entitled to be consulted upon every occasion. But Miss Priscilla had always been self-willed, and had always persisted in regarding her brother as being endowed with a very small share of common sense and judgment, and would as soon have entered into a consultation with her pet kitten as with her brother Godfrey. For his wife, who had been a pretty Southern belle, and was now a lazy, faded Southern matron, she entertained a contempt which bordered on dislike, and her two nephews were her dread and terror. The only one of the family whom she really loved was her niece, a pretty girl of about nineteen summers, who had been christened by the dignified name of Wilhelmina, but was never by any name called anything but "Will" by her family and intimate friends. A plump, black-haired girl, with a high color and sparkling eyes, with an independence of speech and manner which her lady mother said "reminded her sadly of Miss Priscilla." She was a great favorite with every one, and looked upon far and near as certainly the heiress of her aunt's property as though the will had been already written and published for the benefit of all Virginia.

A perfect understanding appeared to exist between the old lady and her young niece, and they had never seriously differed, save on one subject, and this, strange to say, was the new overseer of the plantation, a dark, thick set man of about forty, with a neck and jaw which indicated blood-thirsty ferocity, as plainly as did those of the great bulldog who was his frequent companion. This worthy had been installed in his present office on the death of the poor old Giles Worthington, his predecessor, the mildest and most excellent of men, and had presented himself without a character, in dirty and ragged garments, after dusk, to beg for the situation. Perhaps rumors of Miss Priscilla's character had reached him.—She was famous for patronizing unpromising specimens of human nature, and making excellent use of what every one else repudiated. Many and many an unfortunate "nigger," lazy, thievish, or rheumatic, sold for his faults or misfortunes, had Miss Priscilla purchased, and lectured and doctored into the best servants of that place. And when Ezekiel Doble stood before her with a long story of ill-usage and destitution on his lips, she took a fancy to him forthwith, and established him at once in a lucrative and responsible situation. Every one blamed her, and Miss Wilhelmina remonstrated in the plainest terms, expressing her opinion of the new overseer without restraint. It was the cause of the first quarrel they ever had.

"You dislike the man because he is poor and plain, and ill-used by the world," said Miss Priscilla. "That is the very reason you ought to like him, Will. I really wonder at you."

"And I wonder at you, aunt," retorted Miss Will. "Such a villainous face! such an abominable eye!—If he is not a jail-bird, I'm mistaken. The servants hate him, I can tell you. After poor, kind Giles, whom they all loved, any one would have been unpleasant, and this fellow—"

"Has he done anything to you?" interrupted Miss Priscilla.

"I can't say he has," replied Miss Will.

"Or to any one else? Ah, Will, how prejudiced you are—just like your mother. You value people for

their possessions. I have studied that man's head, and it indicates an uncommon degree of firmness and a great deal of benevolence. Phrenology is my guide and it never misleads me."

Most people have a favorite hobby, and phrenology was Miss Priscilla's. When she had uttered these words, she believed that she had settled the argument completely, and never dreamt that her niece would venture to contradict her. What was her astonishment, then, when that untutored damsel, with a toss of her head, retorted: "How can a sensible woman believe in such a ridiculous humbug as phrenology? Besides, if it were a science, you have only a womanish smattering of it, just enough to mislead you, and nothing more?"

Miss Priscilla glanced at her niece for a moment in utter astonishment, and then, without a word of warning, lifted her right hand, and boxed both the pink-tinted ears with an earnestness that made them crimson, marched off, locked herself in her own chamber, while Miss Will, in a towering passion, rode home, with the full determination of never crossing her aunt's threshold again. She kept her resentment for some time, long after her heart had quite softened towards the quick-tempered old lady. Indeed, she longed for a reconciliation, but disliked to make the first overtures. Her aunt ought to have apologized for the blow she had given her, she thought, and she waited in vain for some overture from Miss Priscilla.

Meanwhile the spinster had had her hands full with the plantation.—Complaints from the overseer of the slaves, and complaints from the indulged slaves of the overseer, followed one another in quick succession.—Mr. Doble insisted that the "niggers" had been spoiled, and were lazy and knavish, which was very true; and they averred, with equal veracity, that the overseer used them brutally. It was a hard case, but Miss Priscilla had decided that Ezekiel Doble was the man gifted by nature with the very bumps necessary for an overseer, and could not disabuse herself of the idea. Publicly, she refused to interfere, but privately, she commanded Ezekiel to be as gentle with the slaves as possible. Ezekiel Doble affirmed that he was "as kind as it was possible to be to niggers without ruining them."—And the lady could say nothing more—or wouldn't, which was much the same thing. The most rebellious of all the field hands, according to Ezekiel Doble's account, was a light mulatto known by the name of Ralph.—A constant succession of floggings, beginning with the first week of the new overseer's reign, had been bestowed upon the unfortunate man without effect. The blows only made him more savage and less easily controlled, and he muttered threats against the overseer, which made his fellow-servants shudder. One night, after an unusually troublesome day, Mr. Doble left the field for the night, with the promise that before breakfast on the next day, Ralph should receive such a beating as he never suffered before.

"I'll break your spirit you black rascal," he said, "if I have to flay you. I've mastered every dog and horse I ever tried my hand on, and I won't be defied by a nigger." And he looked as he spoke, with his head turned over his shoulders towards the scowling mulatto, as though the words came from his heart.

That night Ralph came to the house and asked to see his mistress. He told her of the overseer's threat, and prayed that she would interfere between them. "I'll promise to work hard and do all he tells me, if missus only will," he said. "I've had so many floggings, lately, and they make my blood bile so. Please, missus, don't let me be whipped to-morrow."

The poor ignorant fellow had few words at his command, but his eyes pleaded as no language could. Inwardly, Miss Priscilla had determined that she would save poor Ralph from his dreaded punishment, but with

an eye to the better preservation of order on the plantation, she frowned upon the negro, and said, in a court voice: "Mr. Doble will do as he sees best. Go back to your cabin immediately, and don't expect me to interfere;" and kept the resolute expression upon her countenance until Ralph was quite out of sight, when she drew forth a handkerchief, wiped a tear or two from her dark eye, and dispatched a message for the overseer. What passed at that interview was never known, but when Mr. Doble emerged from the house he had changed his mind about having Ralph whipped on the morrow.

When the morrow came, there was no Ralph to be found to flog or to forgive. In the middle of the stormy night, with his few garments and some pieces of oat-cake in a bundle on his shoulder, he had left the plantation behind him, and was now hiding in wood or swamp, like some wild animal who hears the hunter on his track. He would have remained free but a short time had the overseer been allowed his own way, but there Miss Priscilla was firm. "No, no!" she said. "Look for him and find him if you can, but I am a woman, and I can't have my niggers haunted with dogs—it's too barbarous." And Ezekiel smothered his wrath as best he might in his mistress's presence, to vent it on his unfortunate inferiors when out of sight. Ralph was not found after three long days' search, nor were there any tidings when a week had passed. Those who joined in the search had overshoot the mark. Ralph still lurked close by home in a sort of cave, amongst the woods, afraid to leave his shadow. The oat-cake was all gone, and the few nuts and acorns which he could find were all he had in the shape of food. He was very miserable both in mind and body, but he never thought of going back to be ruled over by Ezekiel. Sooner than that he would have starved to death.

Once, from his rocky hiding-place, Ralph saw Miss Wilhelmina enter through the woods on her little black horse, going from her own dwelling towards that of Miss Priscilla's, and then, though he was a black man and a slave, he covered his face with his knotted hands, and cried like a child. "Young Miss Will" was the personification of perfection in his eyes.—She had given him a bright silk handkerchief on Christmas; she had tied up his cut finger, and given him jelly for his sore throat. He remembered her a little toddling baby, learning to walk, and now he could not even speak to her. "Ole missus was good, too," he thought. "Only for that Marsa Doble, I neber would have run away from ole missus and Miss Will." And he peered after her as she vanished among the shadows, her black plumes fluttering, her cheek flushed, and her raven hair blown back from her pure brow—a spectacle of beauty seldom seen in those old woods.

Will was going on a visit of conciliation to her aunt—partly because she really loved her and partly because she wanted to ask a favor of her.—The greatest party that had been given in the neighborhood for years was about to take place, and sundry jewels in the possession of Miss Priscilla were the desire of black-eyed Will's girlish heart. There was no meanness in the idea, but rather a sort of childish confidence in the aunt's good nature. "She always was good-natured, dear old soul," she said to herself, "and how I can have kept away from her so long, I really don't know."

"Truth to say, the reconciliation was an easy one, and as they sat together over their tea, Will proffered her request.

"Aunt," she said, "will you lend me your diamonds to wear to Col. G.'s to-morrow?"

"That, aunt," she replied, "I hate both of them as much as ever. Ezekiel Doble is a brute, as you will discover in time, and as for the science, I'd not give a fig for it. So I may go without the ornaments, I suppose."

"No, Will," replied Miss Priscilla. "I like you better for being candid. I see you don't wish to cheat me. But can you take care of the diamonds?—They are worth a fortune, and they will all be yours some day. I would not have a stone lost for worlds."

"I'll be very careful," said Will, gleefully. "Please get them aunt; I long to see them."

Miss Priscilla left the room, and came back in a few moments with a casket in her hand, from which she drew a necklace, bracelets, brooch, and ear-rings of glittering diamonds, spreading them on the black velvet cushion of a sofa for their better exposition, and dilating on their worth and antiquity. In a little while she fastened them on the arms and bosom of her niece, and even in the pink little ear she had boxed in her forgotten anger, and Will danced in the sunlight until they glittered again. "How they will all envy me," she cried, "and how these stones will sparkle by lamplight? Don't I look like a queen, aunt?" She turned towards the glass as she spoke, and started back with a shriek, for reflected in its polished surface she saw the dark face of the overseer. He stood at the door opposite and now entered with an awkward bow. His ostensible purpose was to ask some question relative to next day's operations on the plantation, and he did not seem to notice the young lady or her decidedly uncomplimentary scream. Neither of them guessed that he had been a silent auditor of the whole conversation, or saw him turn with a menacing gesture toward the window as he stood upon the veranda without. An hour after Miss Will rode away with the casket of diamonds fastened to her girdle, and looked back to exchange greetings with her aunt, who stood upon the threshold. "Ride fast, my dear," said Miss Priscilla. "It is late in the afternoon, and the way is lonely."

"Too lonely not to be safe," replied the girl. "I never meet any one coming or going. Besides I shall be home long before dark. Good by."—And she kissed her hand and rode away.

Was there nothing to bid her pause? no sign of danger upon the sky or upon the pleasant road? Were there no good spirits among the woodland fairies to tell of the figure which crouched already in a lonely spot in the heart of the dark wood? Not one. All was peaceful, and she rode on, dreaming of the morrow, and of her own bright beauty, to be so well set off by those fair gems. By-and-by she rode more slowly, and from pure light-heartedness began to sing; and at last she paused entirely, and dismounted beside a little fountain which played amongst grass and moss over snow-white pebbles. In the security of solitude she spoke aloud: "How delightful it will be," she said. "I shall be the best dressed and—well, yes and the prettiest girl there, and I shall dance with Charlie Irving, and perhaps—"

What was it that made her pause with the words frozen on her lips, and turn with an awful shudder? Had that dark form which had been crouching just behind her all this while revealed itself at last? And what was it—man, or beast, or reptile? No wild thing of the forest could have given such a pang of fear to that poor girl's heart as that human face which bent above her, and which she knew at that first terrified glance to be that of the overseer, Ezekiel Doble. At any moment she would have shrunk away from him, but now, in that lonely wood, his presence was an awful thing to her. She thought of the distance from human habitation, of the valuable jewels which she carried with her, of her own weakness and of this man's strength. Yet, after the first scream she tried to conceal the fear she

felt, and looked at him with a proud curl of her red lip.

"Is this an accidental meeting, Mr. Doble?" she said, "or have you some business with me? If not allow me to pass you and remount."

But the overseer stood still between her and the horse, and gazed upon her with a triumphant sneer, which made her blood run cold.

"So my fine lady wants to run away, does she?" he asked. "She don't like my company. The 'villainous face' and the 'abominable eye,' and the man who looks like a jail-bird, don't suit her, eh? Ah! I've listened to your underhand talk to the old woman. I know how you tried to poison her ears against me, and now I'll let you know the truth. I am a jail-bird. I have robbed and murdered, and I'm going to do it again."

"Let me pass," was all that Wilhelmina could utter, for the wild throbbing of her heart.

"Not so fast, my lady," said the man. "There ain't no niggers to call on now. There ain't nobody to do your bidding like a whipped hound. You may scream as much as you please, and the squirrels won't take no notice, nor the birds neither, and there ain't nobody else in these here woods."

He paused a moment and looked over his shoulder, for a rustle in the branches close behind him broke upon the silence. A little animal—a hare or rabbit probably—flitted from amongst the undergrowth across the road, and he turned once more towards the trembling girl before him.

"Them diamonds are worth a fortune, ain't they?" he went on. "I'm goin' to make one out of 'em, if I can. I saw you strutting before the glass, with them a glittering on your arms and neck. The beaux will think you are handsome, won't they? Hark ye, my fine lady, before to-morrow comes that face of yours won't be much to look at. I'll be the kind of face that dead folks have, and that 'jail-bird' you know of will be laughing to hear 'em wonder who the handsome gal has run off with. There's a hole in these woods where they'll never find her after rocks and grass and rubbish is piled over her."

He had caught the poor girl by the waist as he spoke, and he now was feeling in his pocket with the other hand for something which lay hidden there, and which glittered as he drew it forth. And Wilhelmina, turning her eyes towards the blue sky, murmured softly, "Oh, my God! have mercy on me, for this man will have none!"

The bushes did not rustle this time, only two bright eyes, black as night and rolling fiercely from side to side glittered on the overseer from the tangled foliage behind him. Wilhelmina saw the steel glittering above her head, and heard the horrible words with which the overseer bent over her, as she knelt before him in her terror. She expected instant death, for there truly seemed no possibility of rescue. "My parents! my kind aunt! my brothers! shall I never see you again?" she murmured. "Never, never!"

"Not unless you meet 'em in the other world," was the barbarous reply. But as soon as the words had left Ezekiel's lips, he lay stretched senseless upon the ground, flung there by a great black form which now knelt upon his breast with his hands upon his throat, and uttered the words: "Don't be skeered, missy. He shan't do you no harm. He could 'nt now, no way."

It was the fugitive slave, Ralph. Wilhelmina heard the voice, recognized the eager black face, clasped her hands in thankfulness, and fell back, fainting upon the ground.

Before the morning sun arose, Ezekiel Doble was immured in the nearest jail, and Ralph stood before his mistress. She could have kissed his rough black face as she thought of the awful fate from which he had

[CONCLUDED ON FOURTH PAGE.]